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Testimony to the House Committee on Administration
Hon. Hannah M. Pingree, Speaker of the Maine House of Representatives
A look at H.R. 1826 and the Public Financing of Congressional Campaigns
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Good morning Chairman Brady, Ranking Member Lungren and Members of the Committee on House Administration. I am Hannah Pingree, Speaker of the Maine House of Representatives and a resident of North Haven, Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to share with you my experiences with the Maine Clean Elections Act, Maine's system of public campaign financing, as you consider H.R. 1826 and the Public Financing of Congressional Campaigns.

I am here to express my strong support for Maine's Clean Elections System and to tell you a little about my experience with public financing, as a candidate and as a leader. In many ways, public financing has changed the face of Maine politics. Public financing has encouraged many non-traditional candidates to run – from young people and women to working people and single mothers – because they don't have to have networks of wealthy friends and supporters or industry support for their candidacy. Public financing allows candidates – and elected officials – to take the time they need to meet voters and serve their constituents, because they don't have to spend that time fundraising.

And, probably most significantly, public financing has created a separation between the vast majority of legislators and advocates and lobby groups. Under the Clean Elections system, Maine legislators don't receive campaign support from lobbyists. This makes it much easier to weigh their arguments on their merits, and without fear of losing support in the next campaign.

In 2002, when I was 25, I had the unique experience of being both a first-time candidate for the Maine House of Representatives running under Maine's public financing system and also working as a full-time fundraiser for my mother's campaign for US Senate. It opened my eyes to the glaring differences between the two worlds. Whereas I could conduct my own campaign by knocking on doors, attending public functions and stopping to speak with voters wherever I was, my mother was forced to pass up forums and cut short conversations so that she could get back to the phone and dial for dollars. She had to spend all that time on the phone to raise the millions of dollars needed to wage the kind of television battle a US Senate race requires.

The Maine Clean Elections Act was passed by a wide margin by Maine voters in a citizen-initiated referendum in 1996. Public financing for legislative candidates was made available to candidates for the first time for the 2000 election year. Since that time, it has become the norm. It is available for State House and Senate candidates and

candidates for Governor. In 2000, 33 percent of legislative candidates participated in the Maine Clean Elections Act. By 2008, that number had risen to 81 percent and the vast majority of candidates in both parties were running "clean". Candidates who accept public financing are also competitive; 85 percent of the winners in 2008 were "clean candidates." In 2008, all of the Legislative races combined required \$2.95 million in spending through the clean elections system.

The Maine Clean Elections Act works like this: For a State House race, I need to collect \$5 dollar contributions from fifty registered voters in my district in order to qualify for about \$5,000 to run my campaign. Once I have done this, I cannot accept any other donations to my campaign – though a third party can still spend independently and without my knowledge. Once my donations are certified, I receive an initial disbursement to begin my campaign – either in the primary or general election. As the campaign season progresses, the State's Commission on Governmental Ethics and Elections Practices monitors spending on my race. If my opponent spends over a certain level, or if a third party spends to support or oppose me, the amount of money I receive later in the race is adjusted up or down accordingly. Since our small Maine House districts are only about 8500 people, \$5,000 is sufficient to put up signs, send out a few mailings and then have the time to knock on doors and make phone calls. If I have an opponent who runs traditionally and exceeds the \$5000 limit, I can get up to \$12,000 more in matching funds. The clean election act requires 150 checks for state senate candidates and 3,250 checks for gubernatorial candidates, which ensures grassroots support and demonstrated organizing ability prior to receiving public funds.

As I've noted, accountability is a major component of Maine's system of public financing. Any candidate who accepts public funds must account for those funds – to the penny. Should any of the funds be used for any non-campaign-related purpose, the candidate can be fined by the Ethics Commission, or, in rare cases, referred to the Attorney General for prosecution.

As Speaker of the House, I am engaged in recruiting candidates to run for the legislature. With 8-year term limits, we are constantly recruiting for new open seats. I am certain that many candidates would not be able to run for office without the public financing option, and if they did, they would have a much more difficult time winning their campaigns. The idea of raising funds, even the small amount necessary for a State House campaign, is daunting for many people, especially for those from a rural or poor district. But the option of asking fifty friends and neighbors for \$5 so you can qualify for public financing is doable for most people. And as I found out the first time I ran, people were excited to support my campaign, and they were thrilled that, even with modest means, they could make a real difference in my candidacy by writing a \$5 check.

Because clean elections make the entry process into politics more doable, it has become an important tool for recruiting. New candidates and incumbents have come to love clean elections, and we strongly encourage all of our candidates to run clean. And from my limited experience with federal elections, you can contrast Maine's system with federal recruiting, where self-funded candidates are often preferable. You have to question a system where great personal wealth can make someone more attractive to party groups simply because you know they won't require as much funding help.

One issue we still are reconciling with our clean elections system is how to maintain the infrastructure to recruit and train candidates, participate in coordinated campaigns, and still maintain the spirit of the clean elections system. So far, this has occurred through political action committees. PAC's are used in Maine, as they are at the federal level, as a vehicle for leadership candidates to raise party funds and for outside groups to make independent expenditures. Leaders and leadership candidates in Maine cannot use their PACs to support their own campaigns, whether they are clean or traditionally-funded, but they can raise and spend funds to support party activities and independent spending. There has been some criticism of this system, and there are ongoing efforts to strike a balance between allowing fundraising for required party-building activities and infrastructure while maintaining the spirit of the clean elections system.

I believe the policy and process implications of Maine's Clean Election system have been significant. In my time as a legislator, I have watched Maine take on numerous issues – from health care reform to environmental policies – and despite spending by out of state industries, we have passed some first-in-the-nation laws. In many other states, passing bills such as these would be uphill battles. This doesn't mean our legislature has become more liberal or conservative under clean elections. But it does mean legislators are more apt to make decisions based on a bill's potential impact on their district, and less on heavy lobbying campaigns or campaign support.

For example, a major chemical reform bill passed in Maine in 2007 which seeks to take a comprehensive look at chemicals in consumer products – especially children's products – and it allows a process to ban those products that have negative health impacts on children. We had a very fierce lobbying effort against the bill in the State House and in the media by the chemical and consumer products industry, and yet it passed by overwhelming bi-partisan margins, because it was the right policy. I believe the voice of the public was stronger than the lobby and their spending. Clean Elections is not singly responsible for this success, but I think it was a major contributing factor. Our public financing system has created an environment that allows us to pass bold and bi-partisan legislation that is demanded by the public, even when industry forcefully objects. On the chemical issue in particular, Congress has failed to take action in a comprehensive way to regulate chemicals in 30 years. There's no guarantee that Congress could pass a bill like that with a public financing system. But it's hard to imagine how it would be possible without one.

Overall, the Maine Clean Elections Act has been a tremendous success. In the five election cycles since its inception, the administrators and policy makers have honed the system to make it easy to comply with and easy to administer. It has increased the diversity of representatives in our legislature. And I believe it has allowed Legislators to focus on the best policies for their constituents rather than worrying about upsetting the entrenched interests that bankroll their campaigns. I would urge the committee to support H.R. 1826 and give candidates for Congress the option of seeking public financing.